

People of Reconciliation - Pentecost 2020

Date: 31 May 2020 - Pentecost, Reconciliation Week

Location: St George's Battery Point, online

Texts: Acts 2:1-21, Ephesians 2:11-22

There's something very powerful about language. Language is not just for our day to day exchanges with others. Language carries whole histories and cultures. The mission my parents served with is committed to language. Their goal was to record the good news about Jesus in every language of the world, but particularly small languages, for oral cultures. They were driven by the vision from Revelation where people from every nation, and tribe and people and language are gathered around the throne of God singing,

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.¹

This vision gave them the conviction that the Christian faith is not the religion of the white man. It is for all peoples and every culture. I remember their eyes shining with joy when they told me stories of people hearing the good news of God's love for them in Jesus, *in their own language*, and saying "God speaks my language!" Mum and Dad said that this gave great people a great sense of dignity and worth. They always wanted people to know they they did not have to speak English, but they could pray to God in their mother tongue.

That vision from Revelation has its origin in the day of Pentecost, what we sometimes call the birth of the church that we read about in Acts 2. There, just as Jesus had promised God poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples, and they spoke in other languages. Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival, 50 days after Passover. Jews from all over the ancient world flocked to Jerusalem for the celebration. Having lived for generations in these scattered lands they all spoke different languages. On this day, they are astonished to hear the wonders of God declared in their own tongues. They ask "What does this mean?"

Peter gets up and tells them. God had promised that one day he would pour out his Spirit on all people. That day has now come. Christ has died. He rose from the dead. He ascended to the right hand of the Father. He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and poured out what you now see and hear. All who repent and are baptised in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for all people.

That vision of people from all languages and cultures gathered together around God's throne has always and continues to be difficult to realise. In Acts 10 we see that it took the deliberate and miraculous work of the Holy Spirit to teach the first Jewish followers of Christ that the good news of Jesus was not just for Jews of different

¹ Revelation 7.9-10

languages, but for all peoples and cultures. The differences of language and culture always threaten to divide. It's the natural human tendency of the "us" and "them".

In Ephesians 2 we see how God is at work to overcome that division.

For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Through the cross we are not only reconciled to God, we are also reconciled to each other. Through the cross the barriers that stand between peoples can be torn down. Through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit we are brought into the very presence of the Father. By the power of the Spirit the differences of language and culture can become gifts for the strengthening and building of the church. And the Spirit is at work to soften our hearts toward others so we can love and listen and own our failings and say sorry and repent and forgive and embrace and work together.

We meet together in Christ. He is the one who has carried our sorrows and borne our suffering. He has suffered for both the oppressed and the oppressor. In him we can meet and receive each other as sisters and brothers.

This is the spiritual reality. And we are called to live out that reality concretely in the church. We enjoy great prosperity in Australia. But this prosperity has been purchased at the price of the dispossession of the lands of our First Peoples, the destruction of their languages and cultures and their loss of life. Some have called this Australia's original sin. I confess I don't know what living out Christ's reconciliation might look like when it comes to the wounds of our nation's history. I've only got some suggestions. In Galatians 6 Paul tells us to bear each other's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ which is the law of love.² Our Indigenous sisters and brothers bear the great burden of our conflicted history. We are called to shoulder it with them. In Ephesians 4 we read that the body of Christ grows as we speak the truth in love.³ We need to listen to the voices of our Indigenous brothers and sisters as they speak the truth about the history of our land. Listening is the first act of love. It makes space for our neighbour, our sister, our brother. It invites friendship. It opens us to the possibility of learning. In listening we say we are willing to see things through your eyes. We listen because we don't know how to make things right. We need our Indigenous brothers and sisters to tell us the way forward.

² Galatians 6.2

³ Ephesians 4.15

As we listen to the truth from our Indigenous brothers and sisters we may find we're moved to lament. If I can share personally, my parents have given me their heart for people to have the good news of Jesus in their heart language. When the British arrived in Australia there were some 250 different languages across the continent. Now only 18 remain strong and some 80 exist in a highly vulnerable way. It is to the shame of the church in Australia that it was only in 2007 that the first and only complete translation of the Bible into any Aboriginal language was published. I weep because my people have destroyed the other God given languages of this land and with them the culture and heritage of their peoples.

As we listen, we may find we need to confess the truth that we benefit from historic injustice wrought by our ancestors. We may find we need to say sorry and commit to seeking justice in the present.

God has given us all the resources needed for reconciliation in his Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit. I say that in faith, because this feels far beyond us. My hope is that we as the church may be able to take up our calling to be servants of reconciliation and model to and lead our nation in reconciliation.

We pray Your Kingdom Come. This is a prayer for us to work for a just and equitable future for all people. That starts at home in addressing the injustices in our nation's past and present. We pray Your Will Be Done. This is a prayer for us to work for Reconciliation. God's will is that all things be reconciled to him through Christ and that in Christ we might be reconciled to each other. We pray Forgive us our sins. In this prayer we acknowledge our past and we ask for grace to change. As we pray, in the power of the Spirit let us commit ourselves to listen, to learn, to lament and to work for justice in Jesus name.